



# Taking Summer Indoors

For little effort your tender plants can have a second season. *Lynn Byczynski*

AS AUTUMN APPROACHES, bringing shorter days and cooler nights, the tender annual flowers that you coddled through the heat of summer suddenly perk up. They set blooms abundantly and their colors intensify. It seems such a shame that they will soon be killed by frost.

It doesn't have to happen. Many of those tender annuals can be moved inside, where they will bloom for months longer. Most plants will continue opening buds that have already set. Even better, many varieties will set new buds indoors and flower nearly until spring. For virtually no expense, other than the time it takes you to clean up the pots and move them indoors, you can make your house feel like a garden retreat from the dreariness of winter.

Not all summer annuals are good candidates for the home. Perhaps the most important factor is the plant's genetically programmed response to photoperiod, or daylength. Some plants set flower in response to the long days of summer. Petunias, for example, will bloom

at any temperature when the days are long, but once the days get short, they won't bloom above 63°F. Other plants flower when the days are short, in spring, fall, and even winter. Many are day-length neutral, meaning they will flower whatever the photoperiod, as long as other conditions such as temperature and light intensity are right for them. Some respond to photoperiod within a certain range of temperature, then switch to temperature-only response.

In short, the plants that will do well inside in fall and winter are those that are either short-day bloomers or day-length neutral, and that do well in the 65 to 72° temperatures found in most homes.

For a successful move indoors, you also have to match plants to the light intensity you can provide in your house. South-facing windows give you the greatest opportunities; you can find a spot right against the glass for sunny annuals and a bright spot elsewhere in the room for those that prefer indirect light. Some plants will do well even in east- or west-facing windows

**Short-day plants**  
Plants that begin to bloom when the days are shorter than the night.

**Day-length neutral plants**  
Plants that bloom regardless of the daylength.



**Abutilon**

**Short-day and Day-length neutral plants that will bloom on into the winter.**

**Abutilon**

**Begonia**

**Bougainvillea**

**Pelargonium**

**Heliotropium**

**Impatiens**

**Salvia coccinea**

**Scaevola**

**Fuchsia**

**Calibrachoa**

**'Cherry Pink'**

(especially with screens removed and the glass cleaned to increase light intensity).

As the homeowner, you might want to consider another factor in choosing plants to bring indoors: how tidy they are in their blooming habits. Impatiens, for example, will bloom beautifully for months, but every day they drop succulent petals that stick to the floor. Geraniums, in contrast, will bloom and bloom and bloom and then suddenly drop a shower of papery petals all at once.

I also select plants for the house based on their colors—and not because I want to coordinate with my furniture. I don't think you can have a bad color combination with flowers, but I do find that pastels tend to look washed out indoors. I prefer plants with saturated hues—bright yellow, fuchsia, coral, and red—that make a statement and brighten the mood.

Early autumn is the time to get outdoor plants ready to come indoors. With frost dates becoming so unpredictable these days, it's a good idea to be ready to move plants by September. Prune out weak or lanky stems, pick off dead leaves, and give the plants plenty of water and weekly fertilizer (I use Peters 10-5-10 for my container plants) to spur them to set buds as the days cool off. I have large outdoor containers—some 18 to 24 inches—and I can't budge them once they're planted. When I want to save annuals that I've planted with other varieties, I dig them out gently and pot them up into smaller, more manageable containers, about 10 to 12 inches each. I let them rest in the shade for a few days, and then fertilize and put them back in their usual spot to finish off the summer season.

Keep an eye on the weather, and bring your chosen flowers indoors when frost is predicted. If you have an

Indian summer, put them back outside until the cold arrives to stay. Fertilize them with dilute houseplant fertilizer every time you water, but remember that most flowers bloom best when slightly stressed, so let them dry out a bit between waterings. The plants will also appreciate a misting every day once the heat is turned on and the air becomes dry.

## A sampler of some popular plants to bring in for winter.

**Abutilon**—Flowering maple, also known as parlor maple, makes a terrific houseplant as well as patio plant. It blooms profusely without regard to daylength, in every season, covering itself with bell-shaped flowers in shades of pink, red, and yellow. Abutilon needs full sun, so put it in a south-facing window. It also requires ample water and regular fertilizing to maintain the best flower display. All it needs inside is full sun and ample water and fertilizer. It tends to drop its lower leaves in winter, making it look rather scraggly, so you will want to cut it back hard in early spring in order to get it ready for a new season of bloom outdoors.

**Begonia**—The fibrous begonias, as opposed to the tuberous types, will bloom in the short days of fall and winter. Dozens of begonia varieties have been grown as houseplants since Victorian times, but even the common bedding plant varieties will bloom inside. One of the best is 'Dragon Wing', which has recently been promoted as a garden begonia because it is heat



**Geranium**





**Heliotrope**

tolerant. It will bloom nonstop throughout fall and winter. This angel-wing type of begonia has large, shiny green leaves and clusters of crimson flowers that arch across the foliage. Begonias don't require full sun, and will do just fine away from the window in a bright room, or in an east-facing window.

**Bougainvillea**—The brilliant colors of these flowering vines will keep your garden room lively from fall through spring. I have a three-year-old plant that I picked up for a few dollars in late summer. It was sorry looking then but since being repotted and brought inside, it has rewarded me ever since with a flush of bright pink flowers (bracts, actually) that burst out around New Year's Eve. Bougainvilleas require full sun, and should be allowed to dry out between waterings; they bloom better with a little stress. They will bloom profusely, after which time you should cut them back hard and allow them to grow new foliage. The foliage will grow thick again through the spring, readying the plant for its early summer show of color.

**Geraniums**—The common garden geranium, *Pelargonium xhortorum*, which often blooms sparsely in hot summers, puts on an amazing show in late fall in a sunny window. With no rain or wind to shake the plants, they hold onto their petals for a long time as

new buds open, the result being far more flowers than normally seen on a geranium outside. At this time of year, you may be able to find fresh plants at garden centers to pot up in good-looking containers. Geraniums have big root systems, so give them a 10-inch or 12-inch pot.

**Heliotrope**—The vanilla-scented, fluffy flowers of the old-fashioned heliotrope, *Heliotropium arborescens*, love the cooler days of spring and fall. They will bloom well for a few months when you bring them inside and their fragrance makes them a special pleasure. The species is purple, and there is a white cultivar 'Alba'. Heliotropes require full sun, ample water, and fertilizer. They will rest in winter, but bloom again in spring.

This list is just plants with environmental requirements—daylength and temperature—that match those found in most houses. No doubt there are many others that will do well at least for a month or two after bringing them inside. And possibly there are some short-day plants that will set buds inside in winter. So don't be afraid to experiment. If you have annuals other than those mentioned here that are thriving in the shorter days of early fall, bring them inside and see what happens. You have nothing to lose, and a season of free flowers to gain. ♡



**Begonia**

**Most annuals** that were blooming happily outdoors before the first frost will continue to bloom for weeks after you bring them inside. They may or may not set new buds and bloom on into winter. If they stop blooming, and you see no signs of buds, you can either toss them on the compost or cut them back hard and water sparingly to keep them growing slowly until spring arrives.